

AN ANALYSIS OF PUBLIC RELATIONS
AND DIALOGIC COMMUNICATION EFFORTS
OF 501(C)(6) ORGANIZATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The Internet and the World Wide Web are used every day by businesses, organizations, and other groups to communicate with constituents around the world. With more than 71,000 membership associations, also known as a 501(c)(6) organizations, understanding how these groups use the Web to communicate and work with current and potential members is important. Many of these groups work with small budgets (since they are nonprofits) and small staffs, with most individuals taking on multiple job roles.

To better understand how membership associations reach its publics, this study provides an empirical content analysis of Web sites of nonprofit, tax-exempt trade and professional associations in a specific geographical area, and provides several in-depth interview responses to understand the unique public relations efforts and Web communication efforts these associations use. Kent and

Taylor's (1998, 2002) theory of dialogic communication is used as the research basis to examine specific principles outlined to increase the capacity of dialogic communication.

Research is needed on this topic to fill a gap. For example, searching EBSCO Host in "Communication & Mass Media" using the search terms "membership associations" results in no hits. Specific research into 501(c)(6) organizations is clearly lacking.

The paper is organized into the following chapters: review of literature, methodology, results, discussion, and limitations/future research.

The result of this research contributes to the knowledge of the field for membership associations and public relations professionals who work with these nonprofit organizations to better understand dialogic communication principles.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to the Computer Industry Almanac (2007), the number of Internet users surpassed the 1.2 billion mark during its last count in 2006. More than 210 million Internet users were in the United States alone. With these staggering numbers, it is no doubt that communicating with people and groups through the Internet has moved from a discretionary communication tool to an essential communication tool for nonprofit and for-profit organizations alike.

More than 71,000 organizations are recognized as tax-exempt by Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(6) (Reilly 2003). This high number indicates the many diverse membership associations that need to communicate with their audiences. Public relations professionals, whether in-house or through an agency, are called on to build relationships with targeted publics of membership associations. Blake (1990) suggests that public relations professionals help an

association determine how to meet the needs of its members and the industry it represents.

DEFINING DIALOGUE

Simply, dialogue is defined as a conversation between two people (Merriam-Webster 2008). The word comes from the Latin *dialogues* in the 13th century. The first philosophical uses of the word dialogue can be traced back to Aristotle, and relatively more recently, by the works of Martin Buber (1957). In his classic work, "I and Thou," Buber defines dialogue as having traits of reciprocity, mutuality, involvement, and openness.

White (2008) and Czubaroff (2000) note that Buber's idea of dialogue is centered on awareness of and respect for others, allowing individuals to fully realize their humanity. In other words, a dialogic perspective "emerges from the encounter between self and other; prefers a conception of self as continually emerging in and through the relationship with other rather than one anchored in individualism..." (Cissna and Anderson 1998, 65). Further, Stewart (1978) emphasizes that dialogic communication is transactional, meaning that it cannot be "purely subjective" or "purely objective" (p. 189).

Other influential dialogic philosophers include Bahtkin (Anderson, Baxter, and Cissna 2004; White 2008), Habermas (Kim and Kim 2008, White 2008) and Freire (Cissna and Anderson 1998; White 2008).

THE 501(C)(6) ORGANIZATION

The Internal Revenue Service defines a 501(c)(6) organization as the following:

"IRC 501(c)(6) provides for exemption of business leagues, chambers of commerce, real estate boards, boards of trade, and professional football leagues (whether or not administering a pension fund for football players), which are not organized for profit and no part of the net earnings of which inures to the benefit of any private shareholder or individual" (Reilly, K-2).

According to Reilly (2003), these organizations, referred to as business leagues, are groups of people having a common business interest, with the purpose of promoting the common business interest. The activities of an association are to improve the business conditions of one or more lines of business. It is important to note that boards of trade (such as realtors) are considered membership associations as long as the organization promotes the common economic interest of all entities in a trade or community.

Research into the efforts of membership associations is lacking. Of the studies that exist, one, (Grobman 2007) examines the codes of ethics of membership associations. Grobman concludes that ethical considerations are made by the role of the professional association, in turn affecting the content of its ethics code. He also says, "tax-exempt 501(c) membership associations is a ripe area of research" (p. 257). Another study by Mook, Handy, and Ginieniewicz (2007) researches the role of volunteering and membership associations. In this case study, Mook, Handy, and Ginieniewicz note the data suggests an "inner circle" and "outer circle" of volunteers. They say volunteers considered outside of the inner circle may receive less encouragement to participate. The authors make three suggestions: the nonprofit should make an effort to find new opportunities for volunteering among its members; conduct an annual survey to track work done by its volunteers, and, include information in volunteer contributions in its annual report to acknowledge these individuals (p. 518-519). No studies were found that specifically link membership associations and Web site communication efforts.

Though academic research is lacking, the classic public relations text, "Effective Public Relations" by Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006), highlights the importance of public relations and membership associations. The authors indicate 10 ways membership associations create programs to address public relations challenges (p.465-66).

The first is, "to provide members with helpful information" (p. 465). In his 2008 study, Bruning explored the use of dialogue to build organization-public relationships. The results of Bruning's study indicate organizations have its best relationships through a dialogic approach; engaging publics in communication. This includes tailoring communications and actions to the relational needs of publics, including how the organization provides information to its members.

Next, the Cutlip, Center, and Broom note an association's role is to, "expand the association by recruiting new members" (p. 466). Levy and Reifler (2005) said that 20 years ago, an association gained nearly 47 percent of its revenue from dues. Though this number has lessened today (between 18-25 percent), dues are "an essential and theoretically stable source of income." Levy

and Reifler also indicate that increasing membership is one of the most significant challenges associations face. Simply, without members, associations cannot exist.

The third and fourth points are, "to harmonize member viewpoints by promoting positive positions" and "promote the industry or profession" (p. 466). These two are somewhat similar in that they promote viewpoints of the industry to its members and/or the profession. Ledingham and Bruning (1998) found that organizational involvement must focus on relationships with key publics. Further, organizations must communicate its involvement of activities/programs to build the organization-public relationship with publics. Anderson (2004) studied Berger's (1999) view of public relations when the management function responds on behalf of an organization. Berger asked the question, "why do organizations practice public relations?" He answered this by giving four characteristics: first, public relations activities are initiated to help the organization itself; second, publics outside the organization play a factor; third, public relations occurs over many channels, such as media, and lastly, organizations send multiple messages to various stakeholders that are changing. This circles back to the

point made by Cutlip, Center, and Broom - public relations helps associations communicate with various publics both internally and externally.

The next two points are synthesized together. According to Cutlip, Center, and Broom, associations advocate on behalf of its members and help members by improving products and services. More specifically, associations advocate "to influence government legislation and regulation," (p. 265). Belton (2001) noted that nearly \$600 million is spent per year by American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) members to influence public policy, including examples of how membership associations use advocacy to promote their industries (Penafiel 2008).

The seventh principle is, "to gain popular support and combat adverse publicity" (p. 265) A study of a higher education institution by Kim, Carvalho, and Cooksey (2007), found that greater exposure to unfavorable perceptions led to decreased support for the university, stating, "negative publicity, therefore, does more than shape perceptions; it may have effects on various forms of public support that would significantly affect an organization's current and future undertakings" (p. 233).

Continuing education (CE) is important to membership associations, as the next point illustrates, "to train recruits and provide continuing education for all members" (p. 265). A 1998 article by Louis Phillips discusses the importance of CE programs for associations. For example, the National Association of Home Builders created a "National Designation Month" in February to promote benefits of ongoing professional education (Kilbourne, 2004).

Associations also, "contribute to social progress by sponsoring public service programs." A study by Bruning, Langenhop, and Green (2004), demonstrated that city-resident relationships is an important influencer in public relations. Simply, practitioners should be conscious of the ways relationship building can affect the public's attitudes and intended behaviors.

Lastly, associations, "promote behavior standards among members that will enhance credibility and stave off government regulation," (p. 265). Numerous associations hold its members to "codes of ethics." Grobman (2007) examined the codes of ethics of 150 nonprofit organizations through a content analysis. Of the 13 coding categories used, he found that the "principal constituency is a

predicator of the content of its code" (p. 13). The use of codes of ethics gives members of an association cause to act responsibly in a given profession.

Broom, Center, and Cutlip (2006) conclude that the major goals of an association parallel those of public relations - by establishing and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships with its publics.

Bensimon and Walker (1992) say that public relations practitioners in associations must balance many demands of diverse publics, such as volunteer leaders, members, prospective members, opinion leaders, legislators, and adversaries. "Communicating with all of these publics requires flexibility and a firm grasp of the association's unique niche in its specialty," (p. 2).

To reach these publics, organizations are turning to the Internet. Studies have been conducted to discover the ways nonprofits use Web pages (Kang and Norton 2004); including Web page interface design (Kensicki 2003) and how religious nonprofits utilize Web sites (Smith 2007).

PUBLIC RELATIONSHIPS

The concept of symmetrical communication was recognized by Grunig in the mid-1980s (1984). In his work with L. Grunig and Dozier (2002), he notes that symmetrical public relations reflects the growth of knowledge of public relations. Public relations helps to maintain symmetry between an organization and its public. Broom, Casey, and Ritchey (1997) concluded, "the formation of relationships occurs when parties have perceptions and expectations of each other..." (p.95). Further, public relations establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organization and its publics (Cutlip, Center, and Broom 2006).

Stoker and Tusinski (2006) say that the goals of dialogic communication are commendable but unreasonable. "The use of selective communication designed to persuade like-minded publics transforms dialogue into two-way asymmetric communication" (p. 163). In other words, Stoker and Tusinski say dialogic communication has a fault whereby unethical results may occur.

The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), the membership association for association leaders,

released a 2006 study about the public relations activities of associations. The study reports 23% of associations have at least one full-time employee in public relations. Of these respondents, 51% are used for media relations; 52% for press releases; 29% for promoting the industry or profession; 24% for spokesperson's media training; 25% speech writing, 13% government affairs activities, and 3% other (percentages equal to more than 100% due to multiple responses).

The ASAE also asked, "in the last year has your organization used any of the following channels to promote your organization's message, product, or services?" Of the respondents, 62% advertise electronically on its Web site. When asked about return on investment of communication channels, 19% believe electronic advertising via an organization's Web site is the best. Most respondents believe e-mail is the best return on investment (61%).

DIALOGIC THEORY

Interaction is key in relationships. In turn, the building of relationships is essential to the practice of public relations.

Kent and Taylor (1998, 2002) created the first theoretical framework to encourage relationship building between an organization and its publics through the Web.

Within the theory, Kent and Taylor describe dialogic communication as a process and a product, "that is, two-way symmetrical communication's theoretical imperative is to provide a procedural means whereby an organization and its publics can communicate interactively" (p. 323).

Kent and Taylor indicate that relationships between publics and organizations can be "created, adapted and changed" through the Internet. They indicate five principles to help foster Web-communication relationships.

The first principle is the dialogic loop. This guideline elicits feedback from an organization's publics. In their words, this area, "allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns and problems" (p. 326). If an organization has a publicized e-mail address, and it is not checked regularly, it can be frustrating to the user looking for a response, thus defeating the purposes of dialogue.

The second principle is that of the usefulness of information. This includes information that is useful to the general public, not solely the publics an organization targets. This principle indicates that relationships with publics must be created to serve public relations goals and the values and concerns of the publics addressed.

The generation of return visits, the third principle, centers around the notion that Web sites should contain features that make them useful and attractive for repeat visits. One of the easiest ways to encourage repeat visitors is to offer frequently asked questions to users.

The fourth principle is the ease of the interface. This means that the Web site should be easy to use; the interface should be intuitive; users should be able to get around the Web site as quickly and easily as possible.

The fifth principle, the rule of conservation of visitors, guides Web communicators to keep users on their page, without leading visitors off to third-party Web sites. The caution here is that users may leave the Web site and not return to the page.

Kent and Taylor have used the theory of dialogic communication in subsequent studies. In an unpublished

study available through his Web site, Kent (2008) most recently says, "Dialogue will be refined by research, extended by further theorizing, and validated when organizations see how the value of incorporating a dialogic orientation into their relationships with publics. When these three scenarios align, the promise of dialogic public relations will be fulfilled."

In 2001, Kent, Taylor, and White examined how activist organizations use Web communication to build relationships with publics. One-hundred environmental organization Web sites were explored to see if they incorporate elements of dialogic communication. The study revealed that most activist organizations have the technical and design elements needed to engage in dialogic communication but still do not fully use two-way communication.

Three years later, in a 2004 study, Kent and Taylor used the principles of dialogic communication to discover if and how Congressional members were using Web sites to interact with their constituents. The methodology of the study included a content analysis and interviews with Congressional offices. The study found that legislative aides, who maintain the content of a member's Web site, do

understand the value of the Web, but are not using principles of dialogic communication on their Web sites.

Several additional studies by other scholars have been conducted using the five principles of dialogic communication, ranging from an examination of dialogic theory practices on community college Web sites (McAllister-Greve 2005), examining how dialogue is used to build organization-public relationships (Bruning, Dials, and Shirka 2007), and using dialogic tenets to examine how the top 50 global corporations establish dialogic communication with the media through online media rooms (Supa and Zoch 2006).

In 2002, Callison conducted a content analysis of each 2001 *Fortune* 500 Web site to see how the companies use the Web to communicate with journalists. In this study, the analysis showed that more than one-third of companies provided Web areas focused on journalists. In addition, there was a clear relationship between online press rooms and the ranking of the *Fortune* 500 companies, meaning the higher the company is on the list, the more clear a relationship was seen through its Web site for journalists.

INTERNET COMMUNICATION

The communication needs of organizations have dramatically changed with the introduction of the Internet. The Internet is a controlled medium through which organizations are able to communicate with the public and the media (Kent and Taylor 2002). Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2006) say the Internet has the power to communicate with a global audience, allowing for 24/7 contact. Hill and White (2000) concluded that public relations practitioners believe a Web site indicated an organization's competitiveness, enhanced the image, and increased individual sense of professionalism. The researchers also noted the Web site responsibility was typically added to the public relations practitioners "to-do" list.

Public relations research about the Internet has two categories (Kent, Taylor, and White 2003) - attitudes and expectations about the Internet as an organizational tool and Web site design characteristics for providing information to publics. Findings of this 2003 study indicate organizations should be strategic in the designing of their Web sites to improve responsiveness to publics' needs.

The Internet provides special considerations for public relations practitioners. The Internet creates a large public with few speakers and many listeners, with these speakers and listeners on equal terms (Moe 2008). The Internet also provides relative anonymity of users (Anderson 1994). While an organization may gain "visitors" to its Web site, it is not always clear who these visitors are.

There are several research studies centered around nonprofit organizations and how these organizations use their Web sites. (These are typically charitable nonprofits known as 501(c)(3) organizations). Yeon, Choi, and Kioussis (2005) examined how nonprofits use Web sites as a public relations tool. The study concluded that though many top nonprofits had a Web site, the Web sites did not provide journalist-friendly content, thus not engaging this important audience.

Other research studies look at for-profit organizations and Internet efforts. In 2007, Park and Reber examined relationship building through the use of Web sites. The researchers used a content analysis to discover the types of dialogic feature that were on the *Fortune* 500

Web sites. Results of their study indicate that for-profit Web sites attempt to promote control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, openness, and intimacy. When examining two of the dialogic features, conservation of visitors and generation of return visits, corporate Web sites need to do more to draw users back.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Based on the review of available literature, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

RQ1a: Are 501(c)(6) organizations using their Web sites to communicate with prospective members?

RQ1b: Are 501(c)(6) organizations using their Web sites to continue communication with current members?

RQ2: Are 501(c)(6) organizations using the five principles of dialogic communication (dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of the interface, and rule of conservation of visitors) on their Web sites?

RQ3: What are the unique public relations efforts of 501(c)(6) organizations?

Note: From here, 501(c)(6) organizations will be referred to as membership association

METHODOLOGY

To answer this study's research questions, a systematic and objective content analysis of 150 membership association Web sites was examined using the five principles of dialogic communication. The ASAE's Web site was used to search for and choose the study sample. To further narrow the study, the sample focuses on all membership associations, as determined by membership in the ASAE, in the East North Central states, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau: Indiana, Ohio, Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin.

At the time of sample generation, there were 2,753 associations in these five states. Each association was given a code number of 1 through 2,753. A random number generator was used to pull the simple random sample of 150 associations.

To provide qualitative data to the study, a sample of five organizations was pulled to conduct phone interviews.

Each association agreed to answer a series of questions anonymously to contribute to this study. Five organizations were contacted to reach the point of saturation with interviews.

Interviews allow for both open and closed-ended questions about a topic. Stacks (2002) indicates that in-depth interviews are acceptable to use when answering questions of "definition, value, and policy" (p. 85).

For the interviews, each participant was asked the same questions in the same order to add validity and reliability to the individual interview sessions.

Open-ended questions were utilized to develop the topic to gain a deeper understanding of the Web communication efforts and public relations challenges of membership associations. Interviews were conducted over the phone due to distance and time requirements. None of the participants were given questions ahead of time to formulate answers to receive on-the-spot points of view, feelings and perspectives. To remain anonymous, the interviewees will be labeled association A, B, C, and so on. The list of questions asked of participants can be found in Appendix I.

This study used methodological triangulation, the use of more than one research methodology, to cross-check research in an effort to improve reliability and credibility.

RESEARCH DESIGN

For the content analysis, the principle investigator created a one-shot study (Campbell and Stanley, 1963). Qualitative and quantitative markers were used in the content analysis. The coders added comments to the coding sheets to make note of important aspects of the Web sites.

Coding Categories

The coding categories for this research were replicated from Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) dialogic communication theory to build relationships through the Web: dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of interface and conservation of visitors. Appendix II contains a sample coding sheet.

Coding Procedures

The principle investigator used the sample list to start. All quantitative coding was determined with yes or no answers and the number of clicks it took to reach certain aspects of the association's Web site. If a

specific content analysis section could not be found, it was labeled as missing or not available.

INTERCODER-RELIABILITY

Holsti's reliability formula was used to determine the rate of agreement of coding. The coefficient of agreement was .82 without coder training.

RESULTS

Of the 150 sites pulled, 19 (13%) did not have a Web site listed through the ASAE or through a search via Google. This brought the total Web sites to be coded to approximately 131. These Web sites are used to answer the following research questions.

RQ1a: Are 501(c)(6) organizations using their Web sites to communicate with prospective members?

Of the 131 associations with Web sites, 59% (77) are using sites to communicate membership benefits to prospective members. A slightly higher percentage, (62%, 82), have a specific "how to join" page.

During the individual association interviews, an association commented that its prospective members already know about the membership group and have "the same knowledge as our current members." Another association creates a free e-newsletter for potential members that is "paired down" from its current membership e-newsletter. In

the free version, sent to prospective members who have elected to receive the e-mail, the benefits of membership are prominently highlighted.

RQ1b: Are 501(c)(6) organizations using their Web sites to continue communication with current members?

The usefulness of information for current members was measured through a members-only login area and members-only content pages. A total of 59 (45%) Web sites contained a members-only login area. Only one association site did not contain a clear accessibility route to members-only content.

RQ2: Are 501(c)(6) organizations using the five principles of dialogic communication (dialogic loop, usefulness of information, generation of return visits, ease of the interface, and rule of conservation of visitors) on their Web sites?

Through the content analysis, it is evident that many of the associations are using various aspects of dialogic communication through their Web sites. The degree to which each organization is using dialogic communication varies.

Dialogic Loop

Of the associations sampled, 117 (89%) had general contact information available. General contact information included phone number (113, 86%), and e-mail address (82, 63%).

The numbers decreased when looking for specific contact information. About half of the sample (70, 53%) had a specific point of contact for the association's Web site. Of these, all had a specific contact name (70, 53%), while direct phone number (37, 28%) and direct e-mail address (60, 46%) were less.

Only 36 (27%) of the association Web sites specifically elicited user feedback. Sixteen (12%) sites had a section for users to sign up for news. Five (4%) sites included a survey on the homepage.

Usefulness of Information

Eighty-three (63%) of sampled associations had association history information available. Of these associations, the information was attainable in an average of 1.23 clicks. Less seen was an association mission statement (73, 56%).

Current news (70, 53%) was found on about half of the association Web sites. Fewer sites contained an area of archived news (55, 42%).

Approximately 77 (59%) sites had a membership benefits page. Interestingly, 82 (63%) of sites had a page that gave information on how to join.

Generation of Return Visits

Sixty-four (49%) sites had upcoming events or calendar information on their sites.

Only one site had a "bookmark now" feature, while none of the sites had an explicit invitation to return to the page.

Ease of the Interface

Only 4 sites did not include a main navigation piece, leaving 127 (97%) sites with this interface feature. A link back to the home page was provided on 124 of the sites (95%). The number of sites with site maps (34, 26%), Search boxes in the main navigation (48, 37%) and a help section (5, 4%) is considerably lower.

The Rule of Conservation of Visitors

Nearly all of the sites had a page load time of less than four seconds (130, 99%). To keep users on the site, third-party links should open in a new window. Only 76 (58%) of sites had these third-party links open in a new window. Thirteen (10%) sites had a clear time/date update.

RQ3: What are the unique public relations efforts of 501(c)(6) organizations?

Due to its qualitative nature, this question was not explored using the content analysis, but was examined through the association interviews.

Association C indicates that its "evergreen" topics are unique in their field, calling on members who are "at our disposal" and experts in the country and the world.

On the flip side, Association E said its public relations efforts are "not necessarily unique" citing that it engages in some of the "standard" public relations efforts most organizations do, such as media relations and submitting of press releases.

DISCUSSION

It is evident from the literature review that membership associations assist in helping professionals in various business or trade sectors succeed and flourish. For public relations professionals, it is important to understand the needs of the publics associations serve and how they are reached through the Web.

Dialogic Loop

The primary investigator was surprised to notice that 19 of the sampled associations did not have a Web site. One possibility is that the Web site is internally facing (an intranet), but this cannot be verified. Another possibility is that the organization does not have the resources to create a Web page.

Engaging in dialogue is vital to an association. A first, and simple, way of opening a communication channel with your key publics is to offer contact information.

Some of the association Web pages provided excellent examples of dialogic communication. For example, one coder noted the Akron Regional Development Board (<http://www.greaterakronchamber.org>) had one of the better sites with many facets of dialogic communication. The Home Builders Association (www.nahb.org) is another example of excellent dialogic communication efforts in place.

Usefulness of Information

The principle investigator examined the usefulness of information to three audiences: the general public, prospective members, and current members.

For the general public, the principal investigator looked for association history, mission statement, current news, archived news, prominent logo placement, and accreditation information (if applicable).

An investigator noted the current news on one association's page was from 2005. Another note was made that an association had "good organization of the Web site.

The content was stale on some pages, specifically the news page."

When discussing the reaching of current and prospective members, Association D commented that keeping its Web site content fresh was a top priority. This was the only association in the interview process to make a comment about content.

It is important to note that not all organizations will have information for accreditation for its specific business. Of the sample, 116 did not have accreditation information, 13 had accreditation information, and two were not clear if accreditation was available. Of the sites with accreditation information, this information was available in one click.

For visual purposes for the general audience to connect with an organization, 91% (119) had a prominent logo displayed on the page. Logos are an important part of branding that helps publics visually connect with an organization and Web site (Naddaff 2004). It is surprising that of the 131 Web sites available, 12 association Web sites did not have a prominent logo. Though creating a logo is an endeavor not to be taken lightly, it is an essential

part of a Web site. Some of the associations could, potentially, utilize its national association logo, if it has a national, or international connection.

The data suggest prospective members were more targeted than current members. For current members of an association, the principle investigator looked for a member login area and/or member-only content pages. Of the associations with Web sites, 59 (45%) had a member login area and 58 (44%) had members-only content pages. Generally, the members login areas were directly on the home page of the association Web site, which made it clear for the researcher to find.

Association B uses its Web site for consumers, not necessarily for its current or prospective members. The association representative noted, "As a homeowner resource, our Web site does a great job." This association acknowledged that it has a difficult time reaching its members online because of the nature of their work and lamented, "It's hard not to wonder if we aren't doing a good job."

Generation of Return Visits

To encourage visitors to return to a Web site, several tactics can be implemented, including adding upcoming events or calendar to the page and explicitly asking users to return to the page, for example.

Keeping the content fresh and up-to-date is another way to encourage return visitors to a Web site. As previously mentioned, during the interview process, one association noted that keeping content fresh was important to them.

Ease of the Interface

To help users navigate the site, site maps, main navigation and search boxes are all helpful tools.

On one site, a coder said, "I felt as though this site needs better navigation tools. It is a good site, but I wouldn't know where to find membership benefits unless I was constantly scrolling."

The Rule of Conservation of Visitors

A trend that spread across the alumni association Web sites was that user was led back to the college's home page too easily, making it difficult to get back to the alumni

association's page. Another page was noted as being "busy" and having no specific contacts for media.

Unique Public Relations Activities

The five associations interviewed, not surprisingly, had varying opinions on how their public relations activities are unique in the realm of associations.

Association A indicated that its unique public relations efforts involved the sole use of e-mail communication. The association representative noted that the primary investigator was one of the first phone calls they had received in weeks. To this point, this association wants to rely on its Web site to be a communication and public relations tool for its prospective and future members. However, the representative commented, "when someone asks for our Web site information, I think to myself, 'I better not send them to the Web site because we need to update this or that.' Cosmetically we want to get the site where we want it and then focus on the content."

Social networking was cited as a unique public relations activity for Association B. This association is using LinkedIn, a social networking group for professionals, to connect its members. Association C would

like to add blogging to its Web site to "encourage younger members" to visit the site. Overall, this association was satisfied with its Web communication efforts. This particular association also "did not care" how many clicks its site received, but wanted to encourage people to visit the Web site to share their ideas or voice concerns.

Implications for Public Relations

Public relations practitioners who are working for nonprofits can use this information to help identify strengths and weaknesses in their organization's Web communication efforts.

If an organization's Web site (nonprofit and for-profit alike) does not contain basic features of dialogic communication, two-way communication can be hindered.

Employing basic Web communication practices, such as contact information and fresh, up-to-date content, will allow for a better dialogue with publics. Web sites that are stale and have no contact information can be a turn-off, as indicated through interviews.

Limitations and Future Research

This study focused on a narrow geographical area due breadth limitations of the research timeframe.

The commonality between the associations is that they are classified as 501(c)(6) via the ASAE. The organizations' work and industry greatly vary in some instances.

As technologies enhance and gain additional adoption by users, this research should be conducted again to measure changes in dialogic communication uses of membership associations. It would also be beneficial to explore another geographic area to compare results.

Conclusion

This research is important since membership associations are unrepresented in academic research, specifically Web communication and public relations efforts. The goal of this research was to better understand how membership associations use aspects of dialogic communication, while also understanding the unique public relations activities or challenges they face. The results of the study suggest while many membership associations do have Web sites, an alarming number did not in this study. With the number of people connected to the Internet in the

U.S., it is important for associations to tap into this resource to reach potential members while maintaining and cultivating relationships with current members, along with the general public and media.

The most commonly noted challenge facing membership associations is the lack of staff, resources and the knowledge needed to help maintain a Web page. Association A described its Web communication efforts as behind where they want them to be. The association said, "We've gone back and forth between managing the Web site in-house and hiring someone to do it for us." This association has decided to manage its Web site in-house. The association representative noted that they have a learning curve in managing its Web page, noting, "We've invested in Dreamweaver, but don't know how to use it." Also, associations need assistance and the resources to keep content on their Web sites fresh and up-to-date.

Though there are good examples of association Web sites that utilize aspects of Kent and Taylor's (1998) theory of dialogic communication, the majority of associations' Web sites have a long road to travel. The Internet and creation of Web sites are two relatively

inexpensive mediums to maintain to reach a world-wide audience. The continuing challenge is finding resources with the technical expertise to maintain the site and finding a content publisher who can write and load content at a frequent rate.

After analyzing the interviews with the five associations, the primary investigator would have asked a question to each interviewee: what is your definition of public relations? The definition of public relations is often blended with marketing or other types of communication, not necessarily building relationships and encouraging two-way communication with publics.

Associations should consider adding dialogic communication elements to their Web pages to enhance public relationships.

APPENDIX I

Sample Interviewee Questions

1. How would you describe your association's Web communication efforts?
2. If broken down into two groups, how would you describe the key differences between communicating with prospective members and current members?
3. As a member of the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE), do you utilize the "Communication" section for best practices?
 - a. If so, how?
 - b. If not, why not?
4. How do you use the Web to connect with prospective members?
5. How do you use the Web to maintain communication with current members?
6. Principles of dialogic communication are the following: the dialogic loop; usefulness of information; generation of return visits; intuitiveness/ease of the interface and the rule of conservation of visitors. Do you currently use any of the following principles on your association's Web site?
 - a. If so, what principle do you find most effective to these two key publics?
 - b. What principles do you view as important to the communication efforts of your association?
7. What would you describe as some of your association's unique public relations efforts?
8. What is the future of your association's communication efforts over the Web?

APPENDIX II

Coding Sheet

Coder:

Date:

URL:

Time:

Association Name:

Code Number:

The Dialogic Loop

Number of Clicks

Contact Information (general)	Yes	No	
• Contact	Yes	No	--
• Direct Phone Number	Yes	No	--
• Direct E-mail Address	Yes	No	--
Contact Information (specific point of contact)	Yes	No	
• Contact Name	Yes	No	--
• Direct Phone Number	Yes	No	--
• Direct E-mail Address	Yes	No	--
Elicits User Feedback	Yes	No	--
Allows User to Sign-Up for Association News	Yes	No	--
Surveys on Home Page	Yes	No	--

Usefulness of Information

Audience: General Public

Number of Clicks

Association History	Yes	No	
Association Mission Statement	Yes	No	
Current News	Yes	No	

Archived News	Yes	No	
Prominent Logo	Yes	No	--
Accreditation Info	Yes	No or N/A	

* -- indicates not necessary to indicate in the "Number of Clicks" column.

Audience: Prospective Members

Number of Clicks

Membership Benefits Page	Yes	No	
How To Join Page	Yes	No	

Audience: Current Members

Number of Clicks

Members Login Area	Yes	No	
Members-Only Content Page	Yes	No	

Generation of Return Visits

Number of Clicks

Upcoming Events/Calendar	Yes	No	
Bookmark Feature	Yes	No	--
Invitation to Return to the Page	Yes	No	--

Ease of the Interface

Number of Clicks

Site Map	Yes	No	
Main Navigation	Yes	No	--
Search Box in Navigation	Yes	No	--
Help Section	Yes	No	
Link to Home Page on Each Page	Yes	No	--

The Rule of Conservation of Visitors

Page Load Time Less Than 4 Seconds	Yes	No	--
Third-Party Links Open in New Window	Yes	No	--
Update Date/Time Clearly Marked	Yes	No	--

Coder Comments (Was the site easy to navigate? Was the site well organized? Etc.)

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